

DISRESPECTING: A CONVERSATIONAL PRACTICE FOR THE NEGOTIATION OF STATUS IN JUVENILE PEER-GROUPS

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1. Aggressive ways of speaking in male juvenile peer-groups

Over the past thirty years, studies in sociolinguistics, ethnography and conversational analysis have shown that verbal duelling is a most prominent feature of the communicative repertoire of male juvenile peer-groups. This phenomenon does not seem to be restricted to communities of Black English speakers where it has been intensively studied by various researchers (see e.g. Labov 1972, Kochman 1981, Erickson 1984, Goodwin 1990). It was also observed in other cultural and linguistic communities, e.g. among members of Turkish juvenile gangs in Germany (Tertilt 1997). As Labov (1972) already noticed, verbal duelling may be realized in a more or less ritualised way. It may range from traditional sounds that are constructed and responded to in a fixed manner to insults that are created ad hoc and that do not correspond to fixed lexical or grammatical formats. Most important is the distinction between serious and playful disputes. For instance, continuing a quarrel with an insult that is clearly non-serious, can be used as a move to end a sequence of conflict talk.

Verbal duelling, however, is only one conversational practice among various ways of speaking aggressively that are common in male juvenile peer-groups. Verbal aggression may be used to exclude non-members (Schwitalla/Streeck 1989), and aggressive forms of gossiping, devaluating remarks or phantasizing about the activities of absent persons are a prominent means of constituting the group's social identity by marking boundaries against incumbents other social categories (Schwitalla 1986, 1994, Deppermann i.pr.). Our own studies suggest that a wide range of forms of verbal

aggression is also central to intra-group-relations. Teasing, mocking, swearing, devising face-threatening fictional stories about a group-member are examples of such practices that are used to negotiate peer-group-relations, namely displaying membership, establishing rights and duties, arguing about norms and values, and adjusting power- and status-relations among members. Nearly all of these disputes and aggressive acts are framed as jocular, and they are only used with peers. Episodes that are officially keyed as playful are the most important and most regular means of managing serious peer-group-concerns. We are faced with a complex interplay between friendship and intimacy on the one hand and competition and hostility on the other hand by which boys' identities are locally established in playful disputes. Thus, it will be a challenging task to work out how precisely serious and playful aspects are intertwined.

2. Research context

Our data come from a larger research project that aimed at inquiring into the range of communicative practices by which male adolescents organize their peer-group interactions.¹ We observed a peer-group of boys aging from 14 to 17 years who live in a small town near Frankfurt/Main. We tape-recorded their naturally occurring verbal interactions in various settings, such as in the local youth center, on bus tours, in restaurants, or on the local skate-ground. These data were gained in the context of intensive fieldwork. Most prominently, it included regular participant observation for more than two years. Additionally, we conducted in-depth interviews with the members of the peer-group and with youth workers, the mayor, parents, and further significant others. Together with the field notes and other ethnographic documents, the interviews and the membership competencies that we acquired during fieldwork establish an ethnographic framework which provides an interpretive backdrop for our conversation analyses of tape-recorded data, i.e., we aim at an ethnographic conversational analysis.²

3. The emic category *Dissen*

The most common practice of verbal aggression in our data is one that the adolescents of the study call "*Dissen*". "*Dissen*" is derived from the English noun "disrespect" and means "showing disrespect". We will henceforth translate "*Dissen*" by "disrespecting". In disrespecting sequences, the interlocutor's face is attacked and devaluated in a direct and rude mode; the attack is framed as non-serious or at least as non-literal. Disrespecting indeed is related to Black English speakers' verbal duelling: The expression "*Dissen*" and the conversational practice is derived from the American hip-

¹ The research project titled "Jugend, Kommunikation, Medien: eine ethnographische Längsschnittuntersuchung der Kommunikationskultur in Jugendgruppen" ("Youth, communication, media: an ethnographic long-term-study of the culture of communication in adolescent peer-groups") was directed by Klaus Neumann-Braun at Frankfurt/Main University. It was funded by a grant of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (NE 527/1 and 2).

² The methodological conception and specific procedures are described in detail in Deppermann (1999, 2000).

hop-scene. In its initial artistic context, the practice mainly consisted in denying the opponent's credibility as an authentic artist and member of the scene (Toop 1992).

4. A case of disrespecting

Constitutive features of disrespecting, its interactive sequential organization and its social functions and consequences will be discussed by the following analysis of a disrespecting episode. It will be argued

- that sequences of disrespecting are organized according to some patterned interactive procedure and
- that successful moves in disrespecting sequences are characterized by certain linguistic features which account for their rhetorical success.

The participants of the communicative event are adolescents who consider themselves a peer-group. They have known each other for several years and usually pass their leisure time together. They regularly meet in the local youth center. This is also where the recording presented below was made. It is a kind of focused interaction that is, though, characterized by somewhat reduced obligations for participation: It is a spontaneous encounter that is not dedicated to a specific purpose. Therefore, activities or topics are not fixed in advance, and every participant is free to enter or to leave the interaction whenever he likes to. These features constitute an interactive environment that is especially favourable for disrespecting to occur.

(JUK 24-1: "Smoke rings")³

01 Dennis: <<exhales smoke> schh::> (--)

02 Markus: *toll; mach doch ma geschEite ringe, (-)*
great; won't you make proper rings, (-)

03 Wuddi : *A:::CH KOMM- (.)*
U:::H COME ON- (.)

04 Markus: *aja das is doch schEI[ße-]*
uyeah that really [shIts]

05 Wuddi : *[dr]uffes stück schEIße-*
[sto]ned piece of shIt-

06 Fabian: <<creaky voice> =UHUHUUHU↑U:::,>

07 ((claps his hands))

08 <<creaky voice, gasping> HA↑U?> (-)

09 Dennis: *oar die sin gut die rInge °axel°(--)*
wow they are good those rIngs °axel° (--)

10 Fabian: <<barking and choked voice> HA↑U?>

11 (1,6)

- 12 Markus: *wie er (rummacht),*
what (a fuss) he (makes),
- 13 Fabian: <<rasping voice>=ha[hu]??
- 14 Markus: <<imitates Fabian's laughter>[hö]höhö[hö]->
- 15 Fabian: <<laughing, singing, high onset> [du]drÜffes
 [you]stoned
- 16 *stück scheiße,> (.)*
piece of shit,> (.)
- 17 Dennis: *eh markus-*
hey markus-
- 18 Markus: ((stretches out on the couch and
 lights a cigarette))
- 19 (1,2)
- 20 Dennis: <<all> *hier markus [du siehst Echt]so drÜff aus>*
 <<all> *hey markus [you rEAlly look] so stoned>*
- 21 Chris : [ouh,(.) ouh,(.)]
- 22 Dennis: [find ich]
 [I think]
- 23 Chris : [its its](.)jetzt is=er wieder de pÖser heha;
 [now now] (.) now he's the pÖser again hehe;
- 24 Dennis: =kuck ma de markus der sitzt dahinten,(-)
 =uh look at markus sitting over there,(-)
- 25 *der sitzt <<all> im=moment> grad da-(.)*
 <<all>at the moment>he's sitting there just- (.)
- 26 *wie de MIlorad oder so,(.)*
 like MIlorad or so, (.)
- 27 Many: ((laughter))
- 28 Fabian: <<bellowing laughter> hahahahaha>
- 29 ?: [=°schei:ße;°
 [=°shi:t;°
- 30 Chris : <<all> [=de mi:lorad immer im wohnwage ne?(.)
 <<all> [=mi:lorad always in the caravan uh? (.)
- 31 *und wie der gemeint hat-(-)*
 and how he talked- (-)
- 32 *ich verträg fünf [shots,]>(.)*
 I can take five [shots,]> (.)
- 33 ?: [äh?]
- 34 Chris : <<bellowing laughter> hahahu,> (-)

³ Data are German; the translation tries to capture stylistic, rhythmic and grammatical features of the original. See appendix for transcription conventions.

35 und dEnach im Wohnwagen lag und=n.
and Afterwards he lay in the caravan and.

36 (1,3)

37.Alex: der wAr DA letzten dOnnerstag-(.)
he wAs HERE last thUrSday- (.)

The segment starts as Denis smokes his cigarette producing smoke rings. In line 2, Markus ironically acclaims Denis' rings ("great") and then issues a command ("make proper rings") which implies a reproach of Denis' activity. Markus thereby establishes the framework of an aesthetic competition: Who is able to produce proper smoke rings? In this way Markus claims power and authority: He sets an aesthetic criterion by which he tries to control Denis' actions. Markus request is to be understood as the initial move of a power-game: He claims a higher status by asserting a subjective norm that is not yet established in the group and by trying to control Denis' activity although this activity does not annoy anyone.

Now it is Wuddi who reacts to Markus' command. He rejects it with a formulaic expression "U:::h come on" (Line 3). As Markus insists on his negative evaluation and on his command saying "uyeah that is really shit" (Line 4), Wuddi boldly insults Markus by saying "stoned piece of shit". With this disrespecting attack, Wuddi contemptfully comments on Markus' state of being high by drugs.⁴ The insult is realized as a rude depreciating categorization of the addressee. It is spoken in a low voice, it is a fast and short utterance that most immediately follows the preceding turn, and it recycles lexical material of the opponent's turn: Wuddi reuses the word "shit" that Markus had used in line four and inverts it against the initial user. Most remarkably, Wuddi's utterance exactly matches the rhythmic pattern of Markus' preceding utterance. By these features – latching, shortness, lexical recycling and rhythmic mimicry –, Wuddi's utterance is a prominent example of what it means to produce an artful reply which is most apt for constituting a successful act of disrespecting.

The success of Wuddi's reply is evidenced by the reactions that follow (see lines 11-20). Actually, it would be questionable to talk of a successful act of disrespecting if there were no interactive consequences that attest to its success. Success does less concern subsequent activities of the target of disrespecting. Success mainly depends on the reactions of third parties. Put differently, it is an evaluating audience that decides on the success of activities of disrespecting.

We can distinguish several appreciating reactions:

- laughter (Lines 6, 8, 10, 13),
- applause (line 7),
- amused repetition of the insult "you stoned piece of shit" in line 15/16,
- confirmation of the truth of Wuddi's attribution in line 20 "you really look so stoned".

⁴ Compare Androutsopoulos (1998, 199f. und 629ff.) for the morphology and meaning of "druff (sein)" in the language of German adolescents.

The appreciating reactions show that Wuddi's insult has been successful: Concerning the status-relations in the group he has made a point. Moreover, these appreciations show that the group enjoys the insult as an entertaining event. The sustained appreciation of the insult continues its impact. It is continuously kept present, and thus the reactions effectively contribute to the destruction of the victim's face.

Meanwhile, Markus tries to defend himself. He mockingly imitates Fabian's laughter (see line 14), and he tries to look cool and untouched (line 18). All these actions aim at the display of autonomy and sovereignty. Markus here uses a technique that is most typical of this strategy of defense: He assumes the observer's role and ridicules aspects of his opponent's behavior that the opponent has given off unintentionally, such as laughing inappropriately or looking silly. However, Markus' defense does not succeed: His utterances are not attended to. Indeed, part of the loss of Markus' face in this episode lies in the fact that he does not get the floor to defend himself. Moreover, his behavior is criticized as being phony: Chris says: "Now he's the poser again" (line 23). This reproach again makes use of expressive information that is interpreted contrary to the actor's intentions. Finally, Denis compares Markus to Milorad who is a peripheral and most depreciated member of the peer group (see lines 24-26). This comparison continues Markus' devaluation. The denigrating comparison derives its impact from its pictorial, metaphorical quality and from its creativity, since the speaker does not simply make use of a common term, such as "poser". The metaphorical comparison is more vivid and more compromising in the way it equates the victim with a devaluated person. Its success is evidenced by the audience's reactions who responds with laughter (line 27/28) and with a story about Milorad that expands on Markus' being a poser (lines 30-35).

In sum, Markus' attempt at exerting power fails. Instead of gaining status, he loses status as the group mocks him and ironizes his identity-claims as being inauthentic.

5. Sequential organisation and participation framework of disrespecting

Though this sequence is just one example of a large corpus of instances of disrespecting, it reveals some general features of this practice. Disrespecting is in sharp contrast to ordinary norms of politeness, such as those described by Brown and Levinson (1987). By initiating a disrespecting sequence, the boys actively try to threaten and to damage their target's face. Most important, this is done without any reason that would call for an argument. In these cases, attacks are not used as means to resolve a conflict of opinions or interests. Rather, conflict talk is established as a procedure that solely aims at claiming and challenging status and at self-entertainment of the boys' group. In order to fulfill its entertaining function and in order to protect social relations against serious trouble, it is necessary to frame insults and replies as jocular activities. Moreover, this is in line with a general stylistic maxim that is pervasive in the peer-group-interactions we recorded. This maxim can be phrased as "Be funny and avoid seriousness!". Disrespecting thus at least officially is an activity that is not to be taken seriously. Though it is for sure that the insults themselves are not to be interpreted literally, the social effects of disrespecting can be much more real and consequential for the position of the individual in the group.

We claimed that disrespecting is a patterned procedure that is used to negotiate status and identity-claims in the boys' group. When we talk about "disrespecting", we can distinguish between singular acts like insults and disrespecting as an activity-frame that includes larger sequences of disrespecting contests. In the latter case, it is an act of disrespecting that establishes the activity-frame which is progressively fleshed out by mutual face-threats, sometimes even in changing coalitions. This interactive realization of this activity-frame "disrespecting" is characterized by a systematic sequence of turn-positions.

We give an account of the positions using the case we analysed in section 4:

0. The pre-context of disrespecting: As we already pointed out, disrespecting does not arise from a serious problem. However, a face-threatening act is the most likely point of departure. So it is in the example: By his command and his depreciating comment in lines 2 and 4, Markus triggers Wuddi's disrespecting attack in line 5.
1. The initial disrespecting attack (line 5): "you stoned piece of shit".
2. The audience's reactions: laughter, applause, amused repetition of the insult in lines 6-8, 10, 13, 15/16.
3. The victim's replies: ridiculing the opponents and trying to look cool (see lines 12, 14, 18).
4. The reactions to the victim's replies: confirmation of the truth of the insult in line 20 and mockery against the victim's attempts at displaying coolness (lines 21-26).

These five positions are the bricks sequences of disrespecting are built of. Often, one of the positions 2 to 4 is absent. However, this does not mean that these positions are merely accidental. Rather, they are notably absent, which means that their absence has determinate interpretive consequences (cf. Heritage 1984, 249ff.). For instance, if the audience does not react, an attack or a reply has not been successful; if the victim does not reply, he is in danger of being considered a coward.

In the activity-frame "disrespecting", there are three systematic participation roles:

- The attacker,
- the target of the attack,
- the audience who evaluates the actions of the protagonists.

Over the course of a disrespecting sequence, the incumbents of these participation roles are not fixed. For instance, attackers may become part of the audience, the target may start an attack himself, or a member of the audience might become a new target.

Regarding its participation framework, its functions and its sequential organization, disrespecting bears many resemblances to teasing practices that have been observed among adults (see Drew 1987; Günthner 1999). However, it sharply contrasts with them by the pervasive use of taboo-words and topics (i.e. sex, drugs, racism) and by the use of terms of person-categorization and -description that are extremely devaluative.

6. Assessing character, status and membership in disrespecting sequences

For a conclusion, we want to shortly discuss the functions disrespecting fulfils in the boys' communicative repertoire. Disrespecting is a communicative practice that is intimately tied to peer-group concerns: Disrespecting is only used towards persons who at least potentially are candidates for peer-group membership. Adults or adolescents

who are unfamiliar or who adhere to clearly different stylistic orientations are avoided or treated with formal politeness. Disrespecting thus presupposes social equality and intimacy (cf. Kotthoff 1998, 298ff.).

Inside the peer-group, boys create communicative events that are exclusively made for displays of character. Using Goffman's words, these events are marked by "interpersonal action" (Goffman 1967): By disrespecting the boys establish an event the outcome of which is not predictable but consequential for the individuals' statuses. In disrespecting events, strength of character, toughness and verbal cleverness can be displayed. Especially in adolescents' groups that are sympathetic to the hip-hop-scene, disrespecting practices are the most prominent means of displaying authentic membership.

At the same time and by the same features, disrespecting can be used as means of social control and exclusion. Disrespecting is used to safeguard the individual's compliance with the group norms, as it functions as a procedure to sanction deviance. This is done in a jocular mode that nevertheless clearly reminds of boundaries of adequate behaviour in group-contexts.

7. Transcription conventions

[]	segments of talk spoken in overlap
=	latching
(.)	tiny gap between utterances (< 0.25 seconds)
(-)	pause 0.25-0.5 seconds
(--)	pause 0.5-0.9 seconds
(1.0)	pause measured in seconds
CAPITALS	loud voice
°	soft voice
:	prolongation of a sound
strEssed	stressed vowel
.	falling intonation
;	falling-continuing intonation
-	continuing intonation
,	rising-continuing intonation
?	rising intonation
(unclear)	dubious hearing
<<all> >	faster than surrounding segments of speech
<<high> >	comment on the way a segment is spoken
((sleeps))	description of non-vocal activities

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